



West Northamptonshire Schools Forum

Minutes of a meeting of the West Northamptonshire Schools Forum held at Council Chamber, The Forum, Moat Lane, Towcester, NN12 6AD on Tuesday 7 February 2023 at 2.00 pm.

Present:

Paul Wheeler – Vice Chair (PW)
Beccy Merritt (BM)
Dan York (DY)
Lee Hughes (LH)
Rachel Martin (RM)
Jon Lake (JL) – online
Louise Samways (LS) - online

Substitute Members:

Kathryn White (KW)

Also Present:

Councillor Fiona Baker (FB)

Officers:

Ben Pearson, Assistant Director - Education (BP)
Emily Cooledge, Strategic Finance Business Partner (EC)
Andy Pymm, Project Manager - SEND Funding (AP)
Katie Morlidge, Senior School Improvement Officer (KM)
James Edmunds, Democratic Services Assistant Manager (JE)
Kathryn Holton, Committee Officer (KH)

1. Apologies for absence and Forum Membership Changes

Apologies were received from Peter French, Hayley Walker (Kathryn White substituting), James Shryane, Eliza Hollis and Karen Lewis.
Apologies were also received from Beth Baines.

2. Declarations of Interest

PW declared in relation to agenda item 7 that he was the Chief Operating Officer of the East Midlands Academy Trust, which included a school in the Northampton Schools PFI Scheme.

LH declared in relation to agenda item 7 that he was the Chief Operating Officer of the Peterborough Diocesan Education Trust, which included a school in the Northampton Schools PFI Scheme.

DY declared in relation to agenda item 7 that he was carrying out a secondment with Orbis Education Trust which included a school in the Northampton Schools PFI Scheme.

3. **Minutes**

RESOLVED: that the minutes of the meeting held on 13 December 2022 were agreed as an accurate record.

4. **Early Years Budgets 2023-24**

BP outlined the results of the consultation and the recommendations for next steps. The aim was to passport as much money as possible to the sector. The consultation had run from 3-27 January 2023 and receipt of only 24 responses from over 500 providers had been disappointing. The majority of responses had been in support of the proposals, which formed the recommendations as set out in the report. After the consultation had been issued the DfE had increased the base funding rate – as outlined in Tables 1 and 2 under paragraph 6.

RM considered that the wording of questions and acronyms were off-putting to those in the early years sector, most of whom did not have the time to read or respond to complex documents. BP acknowledged that the language used could have been clearer. Work needed to be done to improve engagement with the sector.

PW suggested that, for example, 10 minute bite-sized meetings could be helpful. KW stated that the early years sector needed contact with WNC in order to build confidence around engagement. BM agreed that better engagement was needed.

RESOLVED: that Schools Forum members voted unanimously in favour of the proposal to set the central budget at the maximum 5% of the 3&4 year old funding.

That Schools Forum:

- Agreed unanimously with the proposal to remove the notional SEND budget;
- Agreed unanimously with moving £220k from the notional SEND budget into the SENIF budget (equivalent to 4p on the base rate);
- Agreed unanimously with passing all of the increase on 3&4 year old funding through the base rate for universal and additional hours;
- Agreed unanimously that the “contingency budget” for 3&4 year olds is the expected funding WNC will need to pay as base rate for 3&4 year olds above the number of hours that WNC is funded for by the DfE;
- Agreed unanimously with passing all of the increase on two year old funding through the 2 year old provider rate;
- Agreed unanimously with the proposal that any unspent central budget be used to offset any overspends in other areas of the early years budget;
- Agreed unanimously with the MNS proposal to fund 5% on IDACI 30% and the remainder on January census hours;
- Agreed unanimously with the proposed distribution of early years reserve funding as a one-off distribution to support providers with the increased cost of living.

5. **2022-23 DSG Monitoring**

EC presented the report and highlighted that the DSG forecast outturn position for Quarter 3 was a favourable move of £0.8m from Quarter 2.

PW noted the slight reduction in the forecast high needs overspend and the early years underspend. BP confirmed that plans would be in place to ensure this money was used next year.

RESOLVED: that Schools Forum noted the forecast outturn position for the year ending 31 March 2023.

6. **DSG Funding Update 2023-24**

EC presented the report and advised that the final settlement from the DfE had now been received. The report outlined the DSG allocations for the next financial year. WNC's 2023-24 allocation of the increased funds was £31.9m which was an increase of 7.7%. The funding allocations were summarised in Table 2.

The allocations included additional grant indicative allocations of £10.7m in the schools block and £2.5m in the high needs block. These related to increases announced in the autumn statement and were in addition to allocations that came through the NFF, though still subject to the same DSG terms and conditions.

Table 2 summarised an increase in funding of just over £31m from this financial year to the next financial year. An additional £23m in the schools block, £7m in the high needs block, £1.6m additional in early years and a reduction in the central schools services block which reflected the government's unwinding of the historical responsibilities element of the CSSB by 20% per year.

The schools block included the requirement to provide an update to the maintained schools balances form, which was given in the appendix.

WNC's high needs block increase of £7m represented the authority's share of the £965m national increase for 2023-24 which was in line with the national average. The temporary statutory override whereby high needs deficits could be ring fenced from WNC general fund balances had been extended until March 2026.

WNC has had an ongoing high needs annual deficit of about £1.2m due to funding always being outstripped by the inherent demand. The revised high needs budget was shown in Table 4.

BP advised that WNC were still awaiting the Green Paper which was needed to understand the SEND reforms and how they had been implemented nationally.

RESOLVED: that Schools Forum noted the final funding settlement and schools budgets for 2023-24.

7. **WNC Final Budget Proposals 2023-24**

(a) General Overview

EC provided a general overview of the WNC final budget proposals. The paper outlined the challenges being faced due to inflation, cost of living crisis and the first year with no Covid funding, together with the impact of Covid being played out in the demands of adult and children's social care.

An initially identified funding gap of about £58m was reduced to zero through a series of star chambers (budget challenge sessions). As a local authority WNC was legally required to set a balanced budget.

The final budget proposals include an additional £50m in additional base budget growth to account for the inherent demand pressures and anticipated demographic growth as well as savings and efficiencies of £32.3m.

In terms of education, the proposals for growth equated to just over £600k – largely from the reduction in the CSSB. There was a recognition that it was challenging to meet the EP income targets which had not been revised for a number of years and so that target had been reduced. There had also been some re-baselining of the SEND legal budget which had been overspending in the current financial year due to increased demand. This had been offset by just over £0.5m in savings and efficiencies. The only saving requiring some work was the £75k linked to SEND improvement. A review had been undertaken around whether WNC were funding appropriately between education, social care and health. This showed that funding of the current cohort represented the true position and resulted in a change offset by additional funding through the final settlement from the government in December.

A capital strategy had also been produced with £65m of additional proposals on top of the current capital programme over next 4 years of £126bn. This largely related to highways and regeneration, but £33m related to children's services such as the SEND capital expansion programme, the new special school and other smaller schemes.

PW noted that children were coming into West Northants with high needs and no diagnosis. Diagnosis was taking about a year because professionals such as educational psychologists (EPs) were not available. Was there anything arising from the compromises WNC had made to balance the budget that would be likely to have a direct impact on those delivering the education? BP advised no, but acknowledged that recruitment of EPs was very difficult. In response to this WNC had reduced the income generation requirement which EPs faced in addition to their statutory work which should result in less pressure.

DY noted that schools were having to engage EP services privately due to the shortage. BP advised that all areas were struggling to recruit EPs. Alternative models were being looked at but costs had increased.

(b) Schools PFI Update

BP apologised for the lack of a report relating to the PFI issues. This was a complex matter and WNC was not yet in a position to share proposed actions. BP proposed an extraordinary meeting of Schools Forum be held in the first week of March to consider the options and have a detailed discussion.

PW expressed continued disappointment with the lack of information and engagement around the PFI issues. He agreed that it would be helpful to hold an extraordinary meeting on this matter and requested that the Chief Executive and the Assistant Director Assets be invited to attend.

FB advised that she would be grateful for Schools Forum to put forward their views since these were already being voiced by her and BP.

DY expressed concern that each of the 40+ PFI schools were facing cost increases of between £22k and £100k which would ultimately have a detrimental effect on children's education. BP noted that this was a decision for WNC not Schools Forum. DY considered that there had been a lack of transparency and the potential fallout for schools needed to be made clear.

JE advised that the extraordinary meeting would be held in public and suggested a single item agenda to give more flexibility. Schools Forum members expressed support for inviting representatives from all PFI schools to attend the meeting, although questions should be asked for in advance. PW reiterated that there would be no decision making power but Schools Forum could comment on the direction being taken by WNC on a long term issue that had a significant impact.

RESOLVED: That Schools Forum members noted the WNC Final Budget proposals 2023-24 and Medium Term Financial Plan.

That Schools Forum agreed to hold an extraordinary meeting to consider matters relating to the Schools PFI.

8. **SEND Improvement Update**

AP presented the report and outlined the three areas of SEND service improvements:

1 Additional resource places – this would be delivered through additional capacity in mainstream units and a new special school planned for 2025.

2 SEND ranges was launched in November 2022. Further engagement and training was needed to move forward over the next few years.

3 SEND funding project – this was a combination of Targeted SEND Funding (for those without an EHCP) and support for those with an EHCP. Key dates were outlined for the three year plan and work was progressing with modelling. Regular updates would be provided to Schools Forum.

BM noted that early years settings had seen a massive increase in the level of SEND need but there was nowhere to go. BP agreed that early intervention was important.

DY acknowledged the strategic approach taken but stated that there was frustration from school leaders because current communications were poor. Good communication was critical to getting schools on board. DY was concerned about how far schools' budgets could be stretched. The plan was for 3 years, but many children needed support now.

RM agreed with DY and also expressed concern over funding against ranges as it was uncertain whether funding would increase or decrease. RM noted that early years could prepare schools by identifying the number of pupils with needs early on.

BP stated that a robust needs assessment needed to be undertaken and shared. Investment from WNC in additional staff to drive improvement would bear fruit. The purpose of introducing ranges was not to save money but to provide clarity and consistency in allocating funding. This needed to be done transparently to improved quality.

RESOLVED: That Schools Forum noted the report.

9. **Forward Plan**

JE presented the Forward Plan, highlighting that proposed meeting dates for 2023-24 followed the schedule used in the current year.

PW invited members to raise any points on the Forward Plan that they wished Schools Forum to consider.

RESOLVED: That Schools Forum noted the latest version of the Forward Plan and the proposed meeting dates for 2023-24.

10. **Urgent Business**

The meeting closed at 3.45 pm

Chair: _____

Date: _____